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DE RUEHIN #1156 0930832  
ZNR UUUUU ZZH  
R 030832Z APR 06  
FM AIT TAIPEI  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 9503  
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RUEHHK/AMCONSUL HONG KONG 6202

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E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: MEDIA REACTION: CHINA'S PANDA OFFER

**¶1.** Summary: Taiwan dailies April 1-3 focused much of their coverage on the construction of Taiwan's fourth nuclear-power plant, and reports that its budget will be exhausted this May because of lack of further action by Taiwan's Executive Yuan; Taiwan's Council of Agriculture's announcement that Taiwan is unable to accept China's offer of two pandas; KMT Chairman Ma Ying-jeou's upcoming meeting (4/3) with President Chen Shui-bian; and KMT candidate Kuang Li-chen's victory in the Taitung County magistrate by-election Saturday.

**¶2.** In terms of editorials and commentaries most focused on local politics these three days. The pro-independence, "Liberty Times," however, echoed the government line in its editorial that pandas from China should not be imported. The pro-independence, English-language, "Taipei Times" said in its editorial that the government has done the right thing in rejecting the importation of two pandas from China, because these pandas would have been used for "united front propaganda." End summary.

A) "Pandas Should Not Come to Taiwan Even From the [Environmental] Conservation Viewpoint"

The pro-independence, "Liberty Times" [circulation: 600,000] said in an editorial (4/1):

"... The Council of Agriculture's ad hoc review panel made a professional decision to ban the importation of pandas from China, and we support the decision. ...

"It is fortunate that the ad hoc review panel cautiously made the decision, without being influenced by outside disturbances, by first considering factors such as climate, environment, food, technology that are necessary for raising pandas. ..."

B) "Enough about the Pandas, Already"

The pro-independence, English-language, "Taipei Times" [circulation: 30,000] opined in an editorial (4/2):

"Tomorrow the Council of Agriculture is expected to announce its formal rejection of two zoo operators' applications for the importation of pandas from China. Criticism from within Taiwan (primarily by the pan-blue camp) and from without (primarily Chinese officials) over the decision immediately followed the meeting of the council's Forestry Bureau on Friday. Critics decry the supposedly political nature of the decision. However, they seem to ignore that China's motives in offering the pandas were always political, and brazenly so. One can hardly blame a government for reciprocating with a political decision. ..."

"... Ma, as mayor of Taipei, is no doubt also unhappy because Taipei

Zoo was one of the rejected applicants. Echoing the Chinese media, Ma and other critics of the government's decision complained that political interests should not intrude on gift-giving. But one should never look at such government decisions in isolation. Instead, they should be examined in the context of the entire cross-strait relationship. Only then can one recognize that the gesture was never anything more than an act of propaganda, and an admittedly effective one at that.

"Through the simple act of giving two pandas, Beijing was trying to create the impression that China means no harm to Taiwan.

"But there is barely a reason to believe in the existence of Chinese goodwill toward Taiwan against the backdrop of hundreds of Chinese missiles pointed this way, the repeated efforts by Beijing to keep Taiwan out of the World Health Organization, and the passage of the "Anti-Secession" Law, with possible revisions that will crack down on the very act of expressing support for this nation's democracy and self-determination.

"Under the circumstances, what could the government do? It could have accepted the pandas (ignoring the prison lifestyles that they would have had to endure), but this would have rewarded China for its cynicism and diverted public attention from the growing danger that Taiwan faces.

"If accepting the pandas had led Beijing to respect this place or had at least prompted the removal of missiles, then maybe it would have been justifiable. But this was never going to happen, and everybody knows it. ...."

YOUNG